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ABSTRACT

The Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP) began in New York City by Linda Lantieri who is now the national director. This program is for teachers, students, administrators, and parents who seek to make schools and society more peaceful through creative means. RCCP was developed because of the increasing statistics of violent acts that take place in U.S. schools and the increasing number of suicides and homicides by young people. RCCP helps people recognize different ways to resolve conflicts through peaceful means rather than through the violent acts young people see perpetuated in the media. Teachers can implement RCCP by employing a new classroom management style that includes the following components: (1) K-12 classroom curriculum; (2) professional training and ongoing assistance and support for teachers; (3) a student-led mediation program; (4) parent training; and (5) administrator training. The program finds that teachers report positive results. (JAG)

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WAGING PEACE IN OUR SCHOOLS: BEGINNING WITH THE CHILDREN

Linda Lantieri

Ten years ago, Linda Lantieri co-founded the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP) in New York City, and today she serves as the program's national director. RCCP teaches students (as well as teachers, parents, and administrators) practical skills that enable them to find creative solutions to conflicts as they happen. RCCP helps young people realize that they have many choices for dealing with conflict besides passivity or aggression. At the same time teachers must adopt a new style of classroom management. RCCP's comprehensive approach includes the following components: (1) a K-12 classroom curriculum; (2) professional training and ongoing assistance and support for teachers; (3) a student-led mediation program; (4) parent training; and (5) administrator training. In this report, Linda Lantieri summarizes the basic characteristics of this program and its impact.

Waging Peace in Our Schools: Beginning with the Children

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If we are to reach real peace in this world... we shall have to begin with the children

Mahatma Gandhi

Recent events in our country have shaken us as never before. We have come to the realization that our society is in the midst of an epidemic of violence. Homicide has become the third leading cause of death for children 5 to 14 years old and the leading cause of death for young African-American men. Counting suicides, a gun takes the life of an American child every two hours (Children's Defense Fund, 1994).

In the last few years, we have witnessed the killing of several students in the hallways of what was once a sacred place: the school. At Thomas Jefferson High School in New York City, my alma mater, one student shot and killed another and critically wounded a teacher. This kind of incident has been repeated in other schools throughout the country. The U.S. Department of Justice estimates that 100,000 children carry guns to school each day. Each hour, more than 2,000 students are physically attacked on school grounds. Teachers suffer, too. Each hour, approximately 900 teachers are threatened and nearly 40 are physically attacked.

No school seems immune. A 1993 Harris poll of students in grades 6-12 found a widespread fear of violence at school. This fear is not unreasonable. More than 400,000 violent crimes are reported in and around our nation's schools each year, with still far more crimes going unreported

(Chancellor's Working Group on School-Based Violence Prevention, New York City Board of Education, 1994).

The toll this violence takes on our children's psyches is clear. More than one-third of the students in the Harris poll said they believe their lives will be cut short by violence. Miguel Sánchez, a student from New York City, described his fear during the 1993 National Hearings on Violence and the Child in Washington, D.C.: "When I wake up in the morning, I ask myself, am I going to survive this day? So every day I try to make it seem as if it is my last day on this earth. So far I've been lucky. I don't know when my luck is going to run out."

According to Carol Beck, former principal of Thomas Jefferson High School, more than 50% of the young people in her school have puncture wounds on their bodies. Many of our children in large cities are covering their ears to muffle the sound of gunshots in the night. They exhibit the same signs of post-traumatic stress syndrome we observe in children who grow up in war-torn areas.

Why is this violence taking place? Deborah Prothrow-Stith, Assistant Dean at Harvard School of Public Health, has addressed that question, and her response is hard for us to swallow: Why are our children killing each other? *Because we are teaching them to.* Our society glamorizes violence (Prothrow-Stith & Weissman, 1991). Indeed, the media often portray the hero as one who chooses violence to get what he or she wants and needs.

"They say we are the future," observes 11-year-old Jessica, a student mediator at PS 261 in Brooklyn, NewYork, "but they treat us like we're nothing. On TV, it's sex, drugs and violence – they're projecting that to kids. Practically all cartoons have something to do with guns or destruction."

A few nights after the shootings that left one student dead and a teacher wounded, the students at Thomas Jefferson High School saw *Saturday Night Live* portray the scenes at their school in a comedy skit. For the producers of the program, there were no tears, funerals, or images of kids crying in teachers' arms. Yet we as adults are confused and appalled when we see young people commit violent acts with no apparent remorse. That's the bad news.

The good news is that, as big as the problem of violence is, we have the power to change it. Ten years ago, I co-founded the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP) in New York City, and today I serve as the program's national director. In our work at RCCP, we have found that violence is not inevitable; it is preventable.

I visited Brooklyn's Thomas Jefferson High School after the incident and had an intense discussion with 14 young people, several of whom had witnessed their schoolmate dying. In the first hour, I learned a lot from them about the futility of the violence that surrounds them and the hopelessness they feel. They knew that violence was destroying them, but they saw no alternatives.

Then I began asking them whether, from the beginning to the end of this fatal dispute, there was anything anyone could have done differently. They began to identify eight or nine things – mainly done by bystanders – that had escalated the conflict in the hallway. What I was helping them to see was that the dispute that culminated in tragedy had escalated by the accumulation of many small acts. Young people often think these are things that no one can control, and that makes them feel helpless. When they step back and reflect, they begin to feel empowered.

Although the problems facing our young people are complicated, immense, and horrifying, we do know a great deal about what causes violence; and this knowledge can help direct our search for solutions. First, we need to teach our children values that emphasize respect and concern for others, principles that are universally acknowledged as the basis for any society. Second, young people need concrete skills to deal with their potentially disruptive emotions, as well as with the everyday conflict they will face in their lives. In short, we must teach our children ethical and emotional literacy.

A New Way of Fighting

> "Mom," says 8-year-old Wayne, "the fifth-graders are learning a new way of fighting."
> "Oh? What do you mean?"
> "Well, when kids get mad, they don't hit each other. Other kids help them talk out the fight instead."

Wayne is referring to the student mediation process being established in his school as part of the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program. RCCP began in 1985 as a collaboration between the New York City Public Schools and the New York City chapter of Educators for Social Responsibility (ESR Metro). Now in its 10th year, RCCP teaches intergroup understanding, alternatives to violence, and creative conflict resolution among students,

teachers, parents, and administrators in five school systems in the country: the New York City Public Schools, the Anchorage School District in Alaska, the New Orleans Public Schools, the Vista Unified School District in Southern California, and the South Orange-Maplewood School District in New Jersey.

Participants in RCCP during the 1993-94 school year included 120,000 young people in more than 300 schools from a variety of communities. RCCP is now the largest school-based program of its kind in the country. ESR National established the RCCP National Center in September 1993 to support existing replication efforts and to provide technical assistance to school systems in developing and implementing conflict resolution programs.

The world yearns for "a new way of fighting," one in which people are strong without being mean. Conflict is part of life. We would not want to eliminate it even if we could. But we must end the violence between diverse groups of people that causes so much unnecessary pain and suffering. At RCCP, we are giving young people an important message – that the Rambos of the world, far from being heroes, are pathetic because they can think of only one response to conflict. Young people in our program are beginning to see that the highest form of heroism is the passionate search for creative, nonviolent solutions to the problems of our pluralistic society. They are beginning to incorporate these ideas into their everyday lives, as in the following scene:

> With tears streaming down her face, seven-year-old Veronica picks herself up from the asphalt of the playground and charges toward her friend Jasmine.
> "Why'd you trip me?" she screams.
> "I didn't trip you."
> "Yes you did and I'm gonna trip you right back on your face!"
> "Try it and see what happens!"
> Suddenly, two fifth-graders appear, wearing bright blue T-shirts with the word *mediator* emblazoned on front and back.
> "Excuse me!" says one. "My name is Jessica."
> "I'm Angel," says the other. "We're mediators. Would you like us to help solve this problem?"
> "I guess so," the girls say grudgingly. Jessica and Angel get agreement to some ground rules (including no name calling and no interrupting) and suggest they all move to a quieter area of the playground to talk

things out.

"You'll speak first, Veronica," says Jessica. "But don't worry, Jasmine, you'll get your chance. Okay, Veronica, tell us what happened."

Within two minutes, the girls solve their problem. Jasmine acknowledges that she tripped Veronica by accident as she was trying to tag her. She says she is sorry. Veronica agrees to accept the apology and to be Jasmine's friend again. After being congratulated by Angel and Jessica for solving their problem, the girls resume their game.

The RCCP Model

RCCP is based on a relatively simple idea that is often hard to carry out: People should listen to one another when there are problems and work toward peaceable solutions. RCCP encourages open discussion in a supportive atmosphere to help children and adults better understand conflict and its roots. Most important, RCCP teaches students (as well as teachers, parents, and administrators) practical skills that enable them to find creative solutions to conflicts as they happen. RCCP helps young people realize that they have many choices for dealing with conflict besides passivity or aggression. They learn the skills needed to make those choices in their own lives, and they increase their understanding and appreciation of their own and other cultures.

By creating a "peaceable school" – a safe environment where students are encouraged to experiment with peaceful ways of resolving conflict – RCCP teachers strive to give their students a new image of what their world can be. For this to happen, however, the teachers themselves must change. They must learn, and then apply, a new set of skills for heading off and resolving conflict. Even more difficult, they must adopt a new style of classroom management, one that involves a fundamental sharing of power with students so that they can learn to deal with their own disputes.

To this end, RCCP's comprehensive approach includes the following components:

1. *A K-12 classroom curriculum.* The curriculum concentrates on teaching several key component skills: active listening, assertiveness (as opposed to aggressiveness or passivity), expressing feelings in appropriate ways, taking perspective, cooperation, negotiation, appreciating diversity, and countering bias. Learning these skills requires weekly practice. Teach-

ers are encouraged to do at least one "peace lesson" a week, to use "teachable moments" that arise from what is happening in the classroom or the world at large, and to "infuse" conflict resolution lessons into the regular academic program.

RCCP lessons involve role-playing, interviewing, group discussion, brainstorming, and other experiential learning strategies, all of which require a high degree of student participation and interaction.

2. *Professional training and ongoing technical assistance and support for teachers.* RCCP first provides 24 hours of introductory training in a series of afterschool or full-day sessions. The training introduces the RCCP philosophy and the curriculum; teaches communication, conflict resolution, and intergroup relations skills; and demonstrates "infusion" strategies for integrating these concepts and skills into social studies, language arts, and other academic subjects.

A key to RCCP's success is the follow-up support that teachers receive. Each new teacher is assigned to an RCCP staff developer. The staff developer visits the school between 6 and 10 times a year. The staff developer gives demonstration lessons, helps the teacher prepare, observes classes, gives feedback, and helps sustain the teacher's motivation. In addition, the staff developer convenes bimonthly follow-up meetings after school so that the teachers can receive additional training, share their experiences, discuss concerns, and plan schoolwide events.

3. *A student-led mediation program.* A key component of RCCP's plan for school change, the student mediation program provides a strong peer model for nonviolent conflict resolution and reinforces students' emerging skills in working out their own problems. Ultimately, by reducing the number of fights between students, the mediation component can contribute to a more peaceful school climate. Student mediation is not a substitute for an effective school disciplinary policy; if strictly enforced sanctions against fighting are not in place, students are unlikely to turn to the mediators for help.

RCCP initiates the mediation component only in schools that have been participating in RCCP for at least a year and have a group of teachers who regularly use the curriculum. As explained by ESR's philosophy, school mediation programs are best implemented as part of a larger effort to train staff and students in conflict resolution. This is a significant strength over approaches that use only mediation.

4. *Parent training*. No one would disagree that parents and teachers should work together to teach children how to resolve conflict nonviolently. The reason is clear: If students are to use their emerging conflict resolution and intergroup-relations skills outside of school, they must have family support.

In the last five years, parent education has become a top priority for RCCP. The staff recently launched a Parent Involvement Program that was piloted in New York and is being disseminated to other RCCP sites nationwide. A team of two or three parents per school is trained for 60 hours to lead four 2 1/2-hour workshops for other parents on intergroup relations, family communication, and conflict resolution. During the 1993-94 school year, teams from several schools led workshops for other parents. To date, nearly 2,500 parents have received training nationwide.

5. *Administrator training*. This component of RCCP introduces school administrators to the concepts and skills of conflict resolution and bias awareness and shows them how they can use their leadership to achieve effective implementation of the program. RCCP's primary aim is to encourage administrators to embrace and model the humane and creative approaches to dealing with conflict and diversity that teachers are implementing through the classroom curriculum. RCCP also has learned that the more principals understand and "buy into" the program, the more willing they are to provide the flexibility and administrative support needed to make RCCP work at the school level.

An Observable Impact

From the beginning, teachers have reported positive changes in their students and themselves as a result of introducing RCCP in their schools. Tony Soll, a sixth-grade teacher at the Brooklyn New School, related one of his experiences with the program:

> We had been discussing news articles, and I asked the students in my class to find stories in the newspapers about people solving conflicts. There were two boys in the class who were buddies, and at least five times during the day became enemies. The fighting would go on and on, and it was driving everybody crazy. One day they decided, on their own, to go out in the hall and write a peace treaty. They were afraid to

> get into an argument about the peace treaty, so they picked four other kids – not necessarily their best friends, but definitely people who would be dependable. They all went out into the hall and signed the peace treaty. (At that time, we hadn't even used the word mediation.) The treaty is still up on the wall. It belongs to the whole class now, and serves as a reminder that you don't always have to fight.

A formal evaluation of RCCP conducted in 1989-90 confirmed the teachers' impressions. Metis Associates, an independent evaluator, concluded in its report that the program had "an observable and quantifiable positive impact on students, participating staff, and classroom climate." The teachers reported that they devoted an average of seven periods per month to specific lessons in conflict resolution and that they also were infusing conflict resolution concepts into other aspects of the curriculum. They noted less physical violence in their classrooms, a decreased use of verbal put-downs in favor of more supportive comments, spontaneous student use of conflict resolution skills, and an increase in their students' self-esteem, leadership skills, and initiative. They also reported positive effects in themselves, particularly in their ability to handle angry students and to deal with conflict in general.

RCCP-New York currently is involved in an in-depth, three-year evaluation of the program funded by a grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

A Way Of Life

Learning conflict resolution skills is only one way to address the epidemic of violence in our society. Violence has many sources, as Ted Quant, co-director of RCCP-New Orleans, points out: "I look at the violence and see that it is rooted in fear, rooted in injustice, and rooted in poverty, racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia – all of these are examples of violence because all of them deny the basic humanity of our brothers and sisters and the children in this village we call Earth." Conflict resolution can help, but it will be most effective as part of a larger strategy. As one of our teachers put it, "RCCP is more than a curriculum – it's a way of life."

Those interested in replicating RCCP's approach should keep two points in mind. First, RCCP and other violence prevention programs cannot be "parachuted" into a school. Building an effective program takes time.

Although teacher training, staff development, and other resources provided by outside agencies are necessary, the process of developing an effective program must be driven by leadership from within. Only the school's principal, teachers, students, and parents can create a sustainable program that will have a strong impact on the learning environment.

Second, while RCCP has demonstrated that principals, teachers, students, and parents can work together to create "peaceable schools," this work eventually must be carried outside the schools to create "peaceable neighborhoods." An African proverb teaches us that "it takes a whole village to raise a child." Likewise, we are convinced that it will take the "whole village" working together to rescue our children from the epidemic of violence.

Conflict resolution is not a quick fix. We have learned that it takes time for adults to integrate conflict resolution concepts and a multicultural perspective into their own lives, it takes time for them to learn how to translate those concepts for students, and it takes time for even the most effective classroom instruction to have a significant impact. Some of the most effective teachers in RCCP have observed that it sometimes takes months for youngsters to begin integrating concepts and skills in such a way that their behavior begins to change.

But we are seeing the change. We are seeing adults change first. We are then seeing individual students change second, and finally we are seeing whole schools change for the better. More than anything, we are demonstrating the power of nonviolence and showing that the right kind of intervention can turn us and our schools around. Our focus is on changing the total school environment, thereby creating a safe community that lives by a credo of nonviolence. It takes the words of Gandhi to heart: "It is possible to live in peace." Unlike most school-based programs, RCCP is institutionalized within the school, and its message of nonviolence is seen as part of the school's central mission.

RCCP's hope is that the lessons of peace and intercultural understanding eventually will become a basic part of every school's curriculum, with as much emphasis devoted to teaching negotiation and other conflict-resolution skills as is given to other academic subjects. We *can* create violence-free growing zones in our nation's schools.

Imagine a child being born today who enters kindergarten in 2000 and begins to learn "another way of fighting." Imagine that, from that first day of school, this child experiences an atmosphere in which differences are accepted and nonviolent approaches to conflict are the norm. Imagine that,

by the time the student reaches fifth grade, he or she is chosen by peers to be a mediator to settle disputes among classmates. And imagine that, by the time this young person enters high school, all students are walking through doors without metal detectors and are taking required classes in conflict resolution and intergroup relations. Finally, imagine that this young person will, for the rest of his or her life, have the courage to be a hero for peace and justice.

This imagined scenario already is taking place in the lives of thousands of young people across the nation. We have the preventive tools to begin to turn back the tide of bigotry and violence. Now we must put them to good use. Our children deserve a future in which their right to safety is reclaimed and their cultural diversity is celebrated.

Linda Lantieri is the national director of the Resolving Conflict Creatively Program for Educators for Social Responsibility. She and Janet Dutrey co-authored the forthcoming book, "Peacing Our Schools Back Together", Beacon Press. She can be contacted at RCCP, 163 Third Avenue #103, New York, NY 10003.

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